



BEYOND THE INDIVIDUAL HEARER: AN IGWEBUIKE CORRECTIVE TO FRICKER'S EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE REMEDY

Samuel Ateri Maku

Department of Philosophy, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

Email: [Samuel.maku.95367@unn.edu.ng]

Abstract

Miranda Fricker's account of epistemic injustice names two distinct wrongs, testimonial and hermeneutical, but her proposed remedy stays almost entirely at the level of the individual hearer: a cultivated, reflexive virtue she calls testimonial justice. Critics have long pointed out the awkward fit here. Fricker's own diagnosis is structural: a credibility deficit that tracks gender, ethnicity, or region across countless separate encounters looks less like a string of private misjudgments than a feature baked into how a society is organised, and it is not obvious how one hearer's improved character, however genuine, is supposed to unravel that. This article takes the critique at face value and asks what an actually structural remedy would have to look like, working through Nigeria as a test case. My argument is that Igwebuike, the Igbo-African philosophy of complementarity most fully worked out by Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, gives us exactly the register Fricker's framework is missing: an ontology, and a corresponding way of knowing, built around the community rather than the isolated hearer as the basic unit of credibility and interpretation. Fricker's virtue works one encounter at a time; Igwebuike's communal practices, consensus-building, collective witness, shared stewardship over how experience gets interpreted, work at the level of the group, which is precisely the level at which the kind of structural persistence Fricker diagnoses actually lives. I am not arguing Igwebuike should replace Fricker's remedy. The claim is that they need each other: in a communally organised society like Nigeria, a genuinely adequate response to epistemic injustice has to hold individual virtue and communal epistemic practice together, rather than assuming the first quietly does the work of the second.

Keywords: Epistemic injustice; Miranda Fricker; Igwebuike; African philosophy; complementarity; testimonial injustice; Nigeria

Introduction

Have you ever told someone the truth, and watched them believe your neighbour instead, simply because your neighbour is richer, more educated, or a man? That everyday experience is what the philosopher Miranda Fricker calls epistemic injustice. In her book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, she gives this experience a name and shows why it matters. She says a person suffers testimonial injustice when a listener trusts their word less than it deserves, not because of anything wrong with the story, but because of who the speaker is. She says a person suffers hermeneutical injustice when society has no proper words yet for what has happened to them, so the person cannot even explain it clearly to others, or sometimes to themselves (Fricker, 2007, p. 1).

Fricker's solution to the first problem, testimonial injustice, is a personal virtue. She asks the listener to build a habit of self-checking: to pause and ask, "Am I doubting this person because of the facts, or because of who they are?" She calls this habit testimonial justice, and she treats it as something



one listener builds inside their own character (Fricker, 2007, pp. 91-98). It is a solution built for one person at a time.

This is where many scholars have raised a serious concern, and it is the concern this article takes up. Fricker herself agrees that testimonial injustice is often not a one-off mistake. It is a pattern. Think of a woman reporting domestic violence to the police in many parts of Nigeria: again and again, in different police stations, with different officers, her account is treated with less seriousness than a man's account would be. That is not one bad-tempered officer having a bad day. It is a pattern that repeats itself across the whole system. Sandra Harding has shown how the very institutions that decide what counts as knowledge are already built to favour certain groups over others (Harding, 1991). Charles Mills has shown how a whole society can be organised, quietly and systematically, around not-knowing certain truths, especially truths about race (Mills, 1997). José Medina adds that this problem needs group-level thinking, not just individual soul-searching (Medina, 2013). Gaile Pohlhaus goes further still: sometimes the powerful are not innocently ignorant; they refuse to know, even when the truth is right in front of them (Pohlhaus, 2012, pp. 715-720).

If the problem is a pattern built into how society works, can one person's better manners really fix it? Imagine trying to stop erosion from washing away a whole street by asking one resident to sweep more carefully. The sweeping helps that one yard, but the street is still being washed away. This is the gap this article is interested in. It takes the criticism seriously, and it asks: what would a solution actually built for the whole street look like, not just one yard? Nigeria is the ground on which this question is worked out.

The answer this article gives is Igwebuike, an Igbo word and an African philosophy of togetherness, developed in great depth by the Nigerian scholar Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu. Igwebuike offers something Fricker's book does not offer: a way of thinking about knowledge itself where the community, not the single hearer, is the true home of judgement and understanding. Where Fricker's virtue lives inside one person's head, Igwebuike's practices- group discussion, seeking agreement together, shared witnessing- live inside the group. And because the problem Fricker diagnoses is a group-level problem, a group-level solution has a real chance of reaching it.

This article is organised as follows. Section 2 explains Fricker's diagnosis and her remedy more closely, so we can see exactly where the gap sits. Section 3 explains the wider criticism from other scholars. Section 4 grounds all of this in a real Nigerian example, so the argument is not left floating in the abstract. Section 5 introduces Igwebuike and shows what it adds. Section 6 draws the two approaches, Fricker's virtue and Igwebuike's community practice, together into one workable picture.

Fricker's Diagnosis and Its Individualist Remedy

Let us slow down and look closely at what Fricker actually says. Testimonial injustice happens when a listener's prejudice makes them trust a speaker's word less than the facts deserve (Fricker, 2007, pp. 17-20). Picture a young female corper posted to a rural community, trying to report a case of exam malpractice she witnessed. If the principal brushes off her report simply because she is "just a small girl serving her one year," that is testimonial injustice. Her evidence was not weighed and found wanting; it was never properly weighed at all.

Hermeneutical injustice happens earlier, before speech is even possible in a full and proper way. It happens when society has not yet given a group the words to describe their own pain (Fricker, 2007, pp. 147-154). Think of a Nigerian man in the 1990s struggling with depression, in a time and place



where “depression” was barely spoken of and was often mistaken for laziness, spiritual attack, or a weak will. He is not lying about his suffering, and no one listener is necessarily prejudiced against him. The problem is that the whole society has not yet built the words that would let his pain be recognised for what it is.

Fricker is honest that testimonial injustice, in its worst form, is not really about one bad listener. It is sedimented, her word, meaning it has settled into the normal way courts, hospitals, newsrooms, and hiring offices already operate, long before any particular officer walks into the room. Yet her fix stays personal. The listener who has built the habit of testimonial justice notices the tug of prejudice in their own mind and corrects it. Fricker describes this habit as a mixture of two things: it produces more accurate judgements over time (this is the reliabilist side), but it only works because the listener puts in active, ongoing effort to catch themselves (this is the responsibilist side) (Fricker, 2007, pp. 84-91). For hermeneutical injustice, her fix is even less developed: she simply hopes that, over time, society as a whole builds better shared words, with input from everyone, not just the powerful.

Here is the tension in one sentence: Fricker diagnoses a sickness that has spread through the whole body, but she prescribes medicine for only one cell. Even in her own later writing, where she connects epistemic injustice to a community's ability to govern itself democratically, she still has not fully left the world of the individual listener (Fricker, 2013, pp. 1319-1321).

The Structural Critique, and What It Actually Demands

Several scholars have pushed back on Fricker along the same lines, and it is worth being precise about what, exactly, they are asking for, because “we need institutions too” is too vague an answer on its own. Sandra Harding's work asks a sharper question: who decides which voices sit in the room where knowledge gets certified as knowledge in the first place? Whose training counts as real training? Whose language is treated as the official language of record in a courtroom or a hospital? Fixing the private thoughts of the people already sitting in that room, Harding argues, does nothing about who was allowed to sit there to begin with (Harding, 1991).

Charles Mills pushes further still. He argues that entire societies can be organised, over generations, around a shared not-knowing, especially around race. This is not one person forgetting to check their bias. It is baked into how the whole society was built (Mills, 1997, pp. 11-20).

José Medina agrees with Fricker's basic distinction but insists that the virtues and vices involved are shaped by group position, by how groups relate to one another, not by private soul-searching done alone in one's own head (Medina, 2013).

Gaile Pohlhaus adds a distinction that matters greatly for our purposes: she separates innocent gaps in understanding from wilful ignorance, cases where someone in power could understand a marginalised person's situation perfectly well, resources for understanding it already exist, but they simply refuse to look (Pohlhaus, 2012, pp. 715-720). Consider, for example, a landlord in Lagos who insists a female tenant's complaint about a leaking roof is “exaggeration,” even after being shown video evidence, simply because he has decided in advance that women “always complain.” That is not an innocent mistake waiting for a kinder listener. It is a refusal, and one virtuous hearer correcting their own private bias does not touch a refusal of that kind at all.



Put together, Harding, Mills, Medina, and Pohlhaus are asking for one demanding thing: that credibility and understanding be treated as something groups produce and can fix together, not only something built up from many separate individually virtuous judgements added one on top of another. This is a high bar, and it is worth admitting, honestly, that Fricker's own framework struggles to clear it, because her basic unit of analysis has always been one hearer facing one speaker. What is needed is an account where the community itself, not just the sum of its well-meaning members, is a genuine site of judgement. This is exactly the resource Igwebuike offers, but first, let us ground the abstract critique in something concrete and Nigerian.

The Gap Made Concrete: A Nigerian Instance

Abstract arguments are easier to trust when we can see them at work in real life. Consider a woman we might call, for the sake of a clear story, Mama Chidinma. She and her husband build up a modest business together over fifteen years of marriage, buying land, building a small shop, saving little by little. When the marriage ends, she goes to court to claim her share of what they built together. The court asks her to produce receipts proving she personally paid for specific items. Her husband is not asked for the same proof; his ownership is simply assumed. This is not a made-up scenario. Anthony Diala's detailed study of Nigeria's Social Welfare Department, a government office that settles matrimonial property disputes outside the ordinary courts, documents exactly this pattern: courts applying customary law, shaped by an English-style legal system, again and again demanded documentary proof of purchase from wives, a demand rarely made of husbands (Diala, 2018, pp. 715-718). Mama Chidinma's word about her own life's work was simply worth less, by default, before she ever opened her mouth in the courtroom.

What makes Diala's study so useful for our argument is what actually fixed the problem in the cases where it was fixed. It was not a wave of individual judges suddenly becoming kinder or more self-aware, one courtroom at a time. It was the Welfare Department itself, an office with more room to talk things through, less bound by rigid Anglicised court procedure, that began to credit women's accounts of their own contributions in ways the formal courts historically did not (Diala, 2018, pp. 723-726). Diala calls this adaptive legal pluralism: state law and customary law are not fixed in stone but are constantly being adjusted through dialogue, through institutions that sit between the two and let them talk to each other (Diala, 2017, pp. 150-151). The fix, in other words, was structural and communal in character. It did not come from private virtue. It came from a different, more deliberative way of arriving at a judgement together.

Igwebuike: A Communal Corrective

Igwebuike is an Igbo word. Break it down and you find three small words fused together: igwe (number, or a great many), bu (is), ike (strength). Put simply, it means "number is strength" or "there is strength in numbers." Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu has spent years developing this everyday Igbo saying into a full, careful philosophy of African being, one built around togetherness rather than the lone individual as the basic unit of what it means to exist (Kanu, 2017, pp. 162-179). On this view, to truly be, in the deep African sense Kanu describes, is to be in relationship with others. Standing alone and standing together are not two separate, competing things; each only makes full sense because of the other (Kanu, 2018, pp. 11-19).

Why does this matter for questions of knowledge and credibility? If the community, rather than the lone hearer, is the more basic unit of what it means to exist, then judging whether someone is telling the truth, and making sense of difficult, hard-to-name experiences, are properly communal activities, not private ones carried out alone inside one listener's head. Anyone who has grown up in an Igbo



village, or in many other Nigerian communities, will recognise this immediately. When a serious dispute arises, a land boundary quarrel, an accusation of theft, a bride price disagreement, it is rarely settled by one person's private judgement. Instead, an igwe, an assembly of elders, kinsmen, and often the disputing families themselves, gathers, often under a tree or in the village square, the obi. Each side speaks. Elders ask questions from different angles. Witnesses are cross-examined by many voices, not one. The final judgement belongs to the group; it is not any single elder's private verdict handed down alone. Kanu's broader work on Igwebuike ethics treats this kind of shared, reciprocal way of relating as the normal, expected shape of moral and social life in Africa, not as a special ceremony reserved for big occasions (Kanu, 2019, pp. 1-8). The Kenyan-born theologian John Mbiti captured the same idea in a now-famous line: "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti, 1970, p. 106). A person's very standing as someone worth listening to, on this view, is built by the community, not simply carried by them into it from birth.

Set this next to Fricker's framework and the contribution becomes sharp and specific, not vague. Fricker's testimonial justice is one hearer weighing one speaker. A village assembly of the kind described above spreads the act of judging across many people at once, and that spreading changes the very shape of the risk involved. One hearer's private prejudice, however hard that hearer tries to correct it, remains a single point where things can go wrong. A true group judgement, where people with different positions, different stakes, and different vantage points weigh a claim together, is far less likely to be wrecked by a bias that only one person happens to hold. And where a bias is shared by everyone in the group, at least the process of arriving at judgement is now visible and open to challenge by other participants, in a way one hearer's silent, private, internal correction never is. None of this means village assemblies always get it right; they do not, and they have their own well-known blind spots, especially where women and younger people are concerned, a point Igwebuike's own writers do not deny. The narrower and more careful claim is this: spreading judgement across a community changes what kind of failure is even possible, from a hidden, private mistake that only one person could ever catch, to a visible, public one that others in the room can push back on. That shift is exactly what the structural critics in Section 3 have been asking for all along.

Read in this light, Diala's Welfare Department is not simply a case of good office design. It is a Nigerian institution moving, whether its designers used this language or not, toward the very kind of shared, many-voiced judgement that Igwebuike treats as the basic, natural shape of African social and moral life. What fixed the problem there was not individual judges becoming kinder, one at a time. It was the process of judging itself becoming more communal, closer to the village assembly than to the lone magistrate's private opinion.

A Necessary Caveat: Consensus Is Not Automatically Just

It would be dishonest to present the communal solution as a perfect fix that simply avoids all of Fricker's problems. In fact, the very tradition of African communal philosophy this article draws on has already produced a serious warning about exactly this point, from inside its own family of thinkers. Kwasi Wiredu wrote at length about consensual democracy in traditional African political life, where a decision is reached through the whole community talking until they agree, rather than through a simple majority vote among people treated as separate, interchangeable individuals. Wiredu argued this is not only the traditional African way but, in many respects, the philosophically better way, because a decision only counts as legitimate once the whole group has actually taken part and eventually agreed (Wiredu, 1996, pp. 29, 182-190; Wiredu & Gyekye, 1992, pp. 196-200).



But Emmanuel Ifeanyi Ani, another African philosopher, has challenged Wiredu's picture directly. Ani argues that group discussion is vulnerable to something very human and very Nigerian: the pressure to “go along” and not spoil the peace. Picture a young widow sitting quietly in a family land meeting. Everyone else, mostly older male relatives, agrees on how to divide the land, and their agreement leaves her with almost nothing. She may privately believe the decision is unfair. But speaking up would mean being seen as the one causing trouble, the one who will not let matters rest, and so she stays quiet, and the meeting records her silence as agreement. Ani calls this the danger of social conformity: participants swallow real disagreement to protect group harmony, and this can silence exactly the dissenting or minority voice that a fair process most needs to hear. A consensus reached this way is not truly a consensus that was freely and independently reasoned to (Ani, 2019, pp. 497-503).

This is not a small footnote to be mentioned and quickly moved past. It changes how we should understand the communal solution this article is proposing. The community register is not simply a cleaner replacement for Fricker's individual virtue; it redistributes the very same underlying risk rather than removing it. In Fricker's picture, credibility failure sits concentrated in one hearer's private prejudice. In the communal picture, credibility failure can instead spread out into a quiet pressure toward premature agreement, a pressure that falls hardest on those with the least power in the room, often women, the young, and the poor. What Ani's warning does not show is that the communal approach should therefore be thrown away in favour of Fricker's individual virtue. It shows that a communal process needs its own built-in safeguards against this kind of pressure: protected space where dissent is allowed and even expected, recognised roles for minority voices within the group, exactly as Fricker's individual hearer needs safeguards against private prejudice. Neither approach is automatically safe simply because it is not the other one. A genuinely adequate account, the kind this article is building toward, has to hold both approaches accountable to each other rather than treating either one as a clean, finished solution to the other's weaknesses.

Toward a Complementary Model

None of this is an argument for throwing away Fricker's virtue-based solution. A community's discussion is still made up of individual people, and each of those people brings their own private prejudices into the room, which can still shape what the whole group ends up deciding. A group decision poisoned by a bias that every single member happens to share is not automatically made fair simply because it was reached together. The individual habit of testimonial justice that Fricker describes remains necessary work for anyone taking part in any group discussion, village assembly or otherwise.

The claim this article has built, carefully, is narrower than “Igwebuike fixes everything Fricker's book leaves broken,” and I think it is a more honest and more useful claim: that Fricker's remedy is necessary but not enough on its own, and that Igwebuike supplies, in a way the existing critical literature on Fricker has not fully spelled out, the missing communal half of the picture that structural critics like Harding, Mills, and Medina have been reaching for, but from within a tradition, analytic epistemology, that has never fully worked out what communal knowing looks like at the level of everyday, ordinary being. A joined-up model, holding individual virtue and communal, many-voiced practice together rather than treating either one alone as sufficient, is better placed to answer both the single face-to-face encounter that Fricker's book is built around and the deeper, sedimented, structural pattern that her own diagnosis insists is the real problem underneath it. For Nigeria specifically, this points toward strengthening genuinely deliberative, many-voiced ways of judging credibility, the kind of process the Welfare Department example shows in action, rather than relying



on individual sensitisation training alone, while still continuing to build the individual virtue Fricker rightly insists no institutional design, however well built, can fully replace.

Conclusion

Fricker's Epistemic Injustice names testimonial and hermeneutical injustice with real precision, but its solution, a virtue built inside one hearer's private character, has always sat awkwardly against Fricker's own admission that the problem is structural, a tension that scholars like Harding, Mills, and Medina have pressed from several different directions. This article has argued that Igwebuike, the Igbo-African philosophy of togetherness developed by Kanu, offers a resource that this critical literature has not yet drawn on directly: a way of understanding being itself in which the community, rather than the lone knower, is the more basic unit, and a corresponding practice of shared judgement, documented right here in Nigeria's own institutional history, that spreads credibility-assessment across a group rather than leaving it to one hearer's private, invisible correction. Neither approach, individual virtue nor communal discussion, is enough by itself. Held together, they answer more of Fricker's own diagnosis than either one can answer alone, and they do it in a way that speaks directly to the specific, deeply communal society, Nigeria, in which this article has grounded its argument from the beginning.

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